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Rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

Pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 57/300 and 58/101 B, the present report provides details on the progress made regarding implementation of the regionalization initiative in Western Europe and in other high-cost developed countries, and sets out the proposed strategy and modalities for the implementation of the initiative in other regions. The report also addresses the follow-up to the recommendations of the Office of Internal Oversight Services to streamline and revitalize the operations of information centres (A/57/747).

Section II of the report addresses regionalization as a key feature of the reform of the Department of Public Information. Section III focuses on Western Europe and the establishment of a new regional United Nations information centre in Brussels, and examines the situation in other high-cost developed countries and countries with economies in transition. Section IV reviews the current situation in other regions, providing facts and figures and an analysis of the challenges they face. Section V addresses the objectives and financial implications of the initiative in other regions. Section VI sets out the Department's strategic vision for further regionalization, addresses, among other issues, the special circumstances prevailing in developing countries, and provides details regarding strategizing on a regional level.

Section VII presents a proposed new model, which will be based on the guidelines and criteria for the regionalization of United Nations information centres, and section VIII proposes how to adapt the model to the geographic and cultural characteristics of each region.

* The document was submitted late without the explanation required under paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 B, by which the Assembly decided that, if a report is submitted late, the reason should be included in a footnote to the document.

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Section IX concludes that implementation of the regionalization initiative will enable the Department to strengthen the flow and exchange of information on the United Nations in developing countries, within the resources allocated by the Assembly. A flexible regionalization process is proposed, and it is stated that the views of the Committee on Information will be taken fully into account in the continuing process, in consultation with Member States, with the aim of meeting the Secretary-General's deadline over a three-year period that began in 2003.

Annex I provides information on United Nations information centres and United Nations houses; annex II sets out the guidelines and criteria for regionalization of United Nations information centres; and annex III contains details on fulfilling the information mandate in developing countries.

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I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 15 of its resolution 57/300, the General Assembly took note of the proposal of the Secretary-General, contained in action 8 of his report entitled "Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change" (A/57/387 and Corr.1), to rationalize the network of United Nations information centres around regional hubs, where appropriate, in consultation with concerned Member States, starting with the creation of a Western European hub, followed by a similar approach in other high-cost developed countries, and requested the Secretary-General to submit a progress report on the implementation of the proposal with the objective of applying this initiative in other regions, in consultation with Member States, where this initiative will strengthen the flow and exchange of information in developing countries.

2. In its resolution 58/101 B, the Assembly reaffirmed the above-mentioned proposal and requested that further information on United Nations information centres be provided to the Committee on Information. It also requested the Secretary-General to submit further detailed information on the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the review of the structure and operations of the information centres (A/57/747), and requested the Secretary-General to report in detail to the Committee on the progress made by the Department of Public Information to support the consolidation of United Nations field presences into United Nations houses.

3. On 20 January 2004, at a meeting of the Bureau of the Committee, it was decided that all information that had been requested relating to the information centres should be included in the present report and submitted to the Committee at its twenty-sixth session.

4. A note providing details on United Nations information centres and United Nations houses is contained in annex I.

II. Regionalization as a key feature of the reform of the Department of Public Information

5. The new media landscape compels the Organization to find different solutions to those that had worked well 20 years ago (see A/57/387, action 8). Even though the information centres account for a large proportion of the overall budget of the Department, there are such a large number of them, that many are thinly staffed and poorly resourced. With successive zero-growth budgets and targeted cuts occurring at the same time as a significant expansion in the activities of the Organization, some centres are struggling to make a significant contribution. If the Department's field presence is to be effective in the current budgetary climate, there is no option but to rationalize the network of information centres around regional hubs.

III. Western Europe and other high-cost developed countries, and countries with economies in transition

A. Establishment of a regional United Nations information centre in Brussels

6. Following consultations with the member States of the European Union, as well as bilateral discussions with concerned Governments, the Department closed the nine information centres in Western Europe on 31 December 2003 and, on 1 January 2004, established a regional United Nations information centre in Brussels. The United Nations information services in Geneva and Vienna, which support the United Nations Offices in those cities, were not affected.

7. In January 2004, the Secretary-General and the Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Belgium concluded an agreement on that Government's offer to host the new regional information centre in Brussels. Under the terms of the agreement, the Government provides rent-free premises to the centre and an annual cash contribution of $50,000 for the next four years for the translation of information materials into local languages.

8. The centre, which was officially inaugurated on 30 January 2004 by the Prime Minister of Belgium and the Secretary-General, will serve as the principal source of information on the United Nations for the countries of Western Europe. The establishment of the modern and fully resourced centre, with a staff of 23, including a Director at the D-1 level, nine Professional and 13 General Service staff, should enable the Organization to implement a more robust, coherent and coordinated public information outreach programme in the region.

9. At the time of submission of the present report, the regional information centre had only been in operation for two months. Its full complement of staff was not yet in place and it was occupying temporary office space. The move to permanent premises is expected to take place on 1 July 2004, once refurbishment is complete. It is, therefore, too early to evaluate the success of the regionalization initiative in Western Europe and its impact on the work of the Department.

B. Regionalization in other high-cost developed countries and in countries with economies in transition

10. In its resolution 58/101 B, the General Assembly endorsed the creation of the Western European regional information centre and requested the Secretary-General to examine the implementation of a similar approach in other high-cost developed countries. The Department currently maintains information centres in Sydney, Tokyo and Washington, D.C.

11. The Department has successfully negotiated an agreement with the Government of Australia to relocate the information centre in Sydney to rent-free premises in Canberra, which would release funds for programme activities in the Pacific region, which includes seven developing countries. This should enable the information centre to better fulfil its role as a regional information centre, although additional resources may be needed for this purpose.

12. In view of Japan's role in international affairs, including as a major donor, and the support it gives to the information centre in Tokyo, in the amount of an annual contribution of US$ 200,000 for outreach activities, the Department sees no advantage in changing the current arrangements there.

13. The information centre in Washington, D.C., serves a broad constituency in the United States of America, including the Congress, the media, non-governmental organizations and the general public, and the Secretariat considers the liaison work it undertakes in the host country of United Nations Headquarters to be vital. The Secretary-General therefore intends to pursue economies in other ways, notably through a reduction in rented office space.

14. The Department maintains information centres in the capitals of four countries with economies in transition — Bucharest, Moscow, Prague and Warsaw. The information centre in Moscow is well established and is a natural candidate to become a regional centre. In due course and after consultations with the Governments concerned, the Department expects to make proposals regarding the future of the other three sites, as well as the information centre in Ankara. Any decision on the future of those information centres will take into account their host countries' progress towards the process of accession to the European Union, as well as the status of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offices in each

IV. Current situation in other regions

A. Facts and figures

15. There are currently 55 information centres, one regional information centre and two United Nations information services, which are managed and staffed by the Department. In addition, staff in eight information components in United Nations Offices report to the Department and their staff appear on the Department's staffing table. Of the 66 information offices within the Department's purview, 47 are located in developing countries.

16. Two developing country information centres, at Kabul and Managua, are currently not operational. Of the 45 functioning information centres in developing countries, 17 are headed by staff from the Department, 27 by resident coordinators, and one by a staff member of the United Nations Environment Programme. In total, the 45 centres have 18 Professional posts, 31 national information officer posts and 109 General Service posts.

17. The resource requirements for the two information services in Geneva and Vienna and the eight information components of United Nations field offices fall under section 28 (Public information) of the programme budget for 2004-2005. In addition, the Department maintains a post at the Professional level in the information service of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in Bangkok, and another in the office of the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in Beirut. Information units within the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in Addis Ababa, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in Geneva and the Economic

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Santiago do not have Department staff.

B. Analysis

18. At present, there are a large number of information centres but they do not have adequate staff or resources, a fact confirmed by the Office of Internal Oversight Services in its above-mentioned report (see A/57/747). Too many of the information centres are currently unable to perform their essential functions — media liaison, knowledge management and outreach to educational institutions and civil society — satisfactorily and some are also unable to ensure accountability for their programmatic and administrative (including financial) responsibilities.

19. As part of several retrenchment exercises mandated by the Assembly in the 1990s, a number of Professional and local-level posts that were vacant were abolished or transferred to other centres to meet new demands. As a result, many centres were left severely understaffed. In a few cases, centres no longer have information posts and staff are only able to perform administrative functions.

20. The paucity of regular posts has made it difficult for the Organization to retain well qualified information professionals in its field offices. It has also led to a higher than normal expenditure of operational funds for general temporary assistance, at the expense of programme activities, such as travel for outreach purposes, and the translation and production of information materials. It is clear that the current arrangements are not sustainable.

21. In the developing world, each centre is normally charged with providing services to several countries. The 45 functioning developing country centres are charged with covering 121 countries. A careful review by the Department of the monthly activity reports confirms, however, that budgetary and resource constraints often restrict the centres from being able to extend their outreach activities beyond the capital city of their host country, a fact also noted by the Office of Internal Oversight Services.

22. Within the currently available resources, the existing network of information centres clearly cannot meet the outreach challenges for which it was established. The network, therefore, needs to be reconfigured.

V. Regionalization in other regions

A. Objectives

23. The overall objective of regionalization in regions other than those mentioned in section III is to strengthen the flow and exchange of information in developing countries. More specifically, the objective is to improve access to information on the United Nations for people not currently well served by the information centres, without reducing the service to those countries that find the current arrangements satisfactory.

24. In order to meet the above objectives and to make the most cost-effective use of scarce resources, it is the Secretary-General's view that resources should not be

allocated according to a framework that has proven to be more and more difficult to sustain, but should instead be distributed on the basis of a new model that would include a number of strategically located regional hubs. At the same time and wherever possible, a physical presence would be retained in countries serviced by these hubs through the posting of information staff in the offices of resident coordinators.

B. Financial means

25. The resources allocated by the Assembly to United Nations information centres have not increased in more than 10 years, although mandates have multiplied, new information centres have been opened, operating costs — including security and common charges for United Nations houses — have increased exponentially and staffing levels in information centres have been reduced, as inflation has taken its toll.

26. It should be recalled that one of the main factors that led to regionalization in Western Europe was the disproportionately large share of available senior posts and funding that was being absorbed by the centres in the region. Resources released through the establishment of the regional information centre in Brussels were to be redirected to United Nations information activities in developing countries and to multilingualism on the United Nations web site, as well as to the evaluation of the Department's activities.

27. However, in paragraph 39 of its resolution 58/271, the Assembly decided to reduce the allocation for information centres by $2 million in operational resources. As a result, while some of the staff resources released with the establishment of the regional centre in Brussels, including three posts at the D-1 level and a number of General Service posts, are available for transfer to United Nations information activities in developing countries, the net effect of that budget cut, despite the savings, will be a net reduction in funds available for operational costs, and constitutes a crippling limitation on the Department's capacity to strengthen its information efforts in the developing world within the current configuration.

28. The challenge for the Department is, therefore, to review the structure of its field presence, within the limits of the resources granted to it by the Member States, in order to ensure the provision of information services around the world, in particular to developing countries. Regionalization would help attain that objective by pooling resources and redirecting them to a smaller number of strategically located information centres.

VI. Strategic vision

29. The global media landscape is undergoing dramatic changes. With the arrival of new information communication technologies and the unprecedented speed with which they have been incorporated into the global communications infrastructure, there has been a significant change in the production, promotion and distribution of publicly available information. Whether one lives in a metropolis or in a remote village, the "globalization of information" permeates our lives everywhere, every day.

30. While developed countries have been the main beneficiaries of the communications revolution, developing countries have embraced the new technologies and are making a concerted effort to adapt them gradually to their national and regional needs. It is true that the majority of people in developing countries still do not have direct access either to delivery services based on information and communication technologies (ICTs) or to the information products they provide. However, media operations, policy makers and a growing number of educational institutions in those countries are either already web-ready or taking measures to incorporate the new technologies.

31. Consequently, the focus of the communications operation of the network of information centres must also change. With the help of ICT-based networking, it is now possible for the information centres to serve a much wider audience and provide a vast array of information products simultaneously, in multiple languages and through multiple media. To mount an effective communications campaign, centres must have focused messages with clearly identifiable target audiences, and use the most appropriate communications tools with speed, innovation and variety. To remain relevant and to compete in the evolving communications environment, they must either adapt and change or face the possibility of becoming irrelevant.

32. In view of the dramatic shift in the global media landscape, the Department has reformulated its mission statement, focusing on fulfilling the substantive purposes of the Organization by communicating strategically to achieve the greatest public impact. With a renewed emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency, it has moved away from a previous outreach strategy that was based on the production and dissemination of information products and has shifted to the prioritization of key issues, management and coordination of information from various United Nations sources, the identification of communications partners and the evaluation of the Department's services and products. In an operational environment where the resource base is shrinking and target constituencies are expanding, the Department is keen to make the best use of appropriate partners, including media, civil society, educational institutions and private-sector entities, so that it can leverage its activities and achieve the greatest public impact.

33. The incorporation of results-based management, including self-evaluation, has significantly influenced the operational mechanism of the network of information centres and the communications tools they use to implement their mandates. Under the new organizational goals identified for each operational unit, all public information and communications activities are now being measured, not in terms of outputs but in terms of measurable results. The only way for the information centres to remain viable in the changed environment is for them to adapt to the new approach described above. That strategic vision underlies the proposal to further rationalize the network of information centres, while taking into consideration the circumstances unique to developing countries and to each region.

A. Revised guidelines and criteria

34. In applying the hub approach, the Department has used the guidelines and criteria for the regionalization of United Nations information centres provided in the Secretary-General's report on the reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of communications and public information (see A/AC.198/2003, annex I). As a

result of the views expressed by Member States, including at the twenty-fifth session of the Committee on Information and in the debate on questions relating to information in the October 2003 session of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, the guidelines and criteria have been revised. The revised guidelines and criteria are contained in annex II.

B. Special circumstances prevailing in developing countries

35. The Secretary-General is aware that the gap between developed and developing countries regarding access to information and communications technologies has continued to widen, and that vast segments of the populations in developing countries have yet to benefit from the information and technological revolution. The digital divide, especially the lack of connectivity, makes it all the more difficult to overcome the transportation and communications barriers that exist in much of the developing world.

36. The Secretary-General therefore proposes, wherever possible, to maintain a physical presence in each country that previously hosted a centre to supplement the outreach capacity of any regional hub that may be established. Having national information staff in United Nations system offices in such countries would not only ensure that the expertise of a hub was effectively communicated to people in those countries it served, but would also strengthen the capacity of United Nations country teams to perform information functions in their host countries.

C. Strategizing on a regional level

37. In many instances, United Nations public outreach activities can benefit from an analysis of the synergy within regions, based on common priorities, concerns or languages. In September 2003, the Department convened a strategic communications meeting at Headquarters for information officers from the Middle East and Arab region to discuss ways to enhance public understanding of the role and work of the United Nations in the region. Directors and national information officers from 13 information centres participated, along with information professionals from other United Nations entities represented in the region.

38. At the meeting, it became clear that many of the participants shared similar problems in trying to achieve effective dissemination of the United Nations message across the region, but they were able to pool their expertise and resources to develop consistent regional solutions to overcome these problems. The discussion resulted in agreement on a strategic communications framework for the region, which should help all United Nations information programmes in the region to better meet their objectives. The strategic regional approach also would allow United Nations information officers to tap into the expertise of the regional commissions and benefit from their small but well organized information infrastructures.

VII. Towards a new model

A. Preliminary steps

39. In accordance with paragraph 39 of resolution 58/101 B, the Department will use the three posts at the D-1 level, released with the establishment of the regional hub in Brussels, to strengthen the capacity of the information centres in three cities that are regional media hubs — one each in Africa, the Middle East and Arab region, and Latin America and the Caribbean — where there are currently no D-1 posts. This will contribute to a more balanced global distribution of the Department's senior posts.

40. The three posts at the D-1 level will be transferred as they become available. Since Cairo is the headquarters of the League of Arab States and an active media centre, the information centre in Cairo is a logical choice to receive a D-1 level post. So, too, is the information centre in Mexico City, given its wide reach to the international media. The Department proposes that the third D-1 post be located in Addis Ababa, as it is the headquarters of the Economic Commission for Africa and of the African Union. However, further resources will need to be transferred to that office before it can function effectively.

41. Pending the outcome of consultations with Member States on further regionalization, these information centres will not, for the time being, be formally designated as regional centres. However, once in position, their Directors will be asked to develop strategies for strengthening the regional information capacity of the United Nations and to develop outreach programmes for their respective regions.

B. New model

42. Using the guidelines and criteria, the Department proposes to establish regional information centres in key media hubs. Professional staff from the Department, supported by an appropriate number of staff, would head the regional centres. The regional centres would be equipped with a core level of operational resources. They would differ in size, but the objective would be for each to have the core staffing capacity needed to fulfil key tasks.

43. Unlike the model employed in Western Europe, the developing country model would not consist of one large hub covering a large number of countries, but rather a significant number of small hubs, located so as to ensure that distance and linguistic diversity do not inhibit their operation.

44. The regional model to be applied in developing countries would also differ significantly from the model employed in Western Europe in that the duty station for many of the staff of the hub would not be the hub itself. The lack of technological infrastructure and connectivity, as well as the geographical distances that have to be overcome mitigate in favour of maintaining a physical United Nations presence in those countries that currently have information centres. Information centres in the regions covered by the hubs would, for the most part, be closed, but the Department's national information staff would remain in the country, working out of the offices of the resident coordinators, benefiting from the administrative support of UNDP and serving as an integral part of the country team.

45. The proposed developing country model would take full advantage of the resident coordinator infrastructure present in most developing countries and would work in close collaboration with the United Nations Development Group. In particular, the Department would explore with the UNDG the possibility of retaining the library and resource centres of those information centres that would close.

46. The national information staff — national professionals with knowledge of the local languages and a background in communications — would be a key to the success of the regional model. The Department would seek to invest resources to train and equip the staff working through the hubs and in close cooperation with UNDG. Such a proposed investment would have the additional advantage of enhancing the skills and knowledge of nationals in developing countries.

47. The functions of the regional hub would include the development and implementation of region-wide communications campaigns and the provision of programme and administrative support to the national information staff in the countries served by the hub. Annex III contains further details concerning the division of responsibilities between the regional information centres and national information staff.

48. To be effective, the new model would require the allocation of adequate resources, and the ratio of expenditures on established posts to operational resources would need to be adjusted so that productive, innovative programmes could be carried out locally.

49. Although resident coordinators would continue to be the major spokespersons for the United Nations system in their respective countries, United Nations public outreach activities throughout a region would benefit from the experience and expertise of a senior staff member from the Department who would head the regional information centre. Such an arrangement would be an improvement over the current model, in which resident coordinators, many of whom have no previous experience in public information, are often assigned the additional role of Director of an information centre. The chain of command between the regional information centre, the office of the resident coordinator and the national information staff would be clearly defined, and the regional information centre and the Department would provide guidance and coordination.

50. With careful planning and coordination between the Department and UNDP, national information staff working out of the offices of the resident coordinators would also complement the existing network of UNDP communication staff in the region.

51. A key benefit of regionalization is that fewer resources would be devoted to administrative expenditures. Administrative functions would be pooled in regional hubs, thereby releasing more resources for programme activities. In 2003, two thirds of the General Service posts in developing countries (excluding national information officers) were devoted to secondary information support, such as administrative, clerical and driver tasks. With regionalization, a significant number of such posts would be more directly involved in information functions, thus boosting the outreach capacity.

52. The field information capacity of the Department covers 143 of the 191 States Members of the United Nations. The Assembly has repeatedly reaffirmed its role in relation to the opening of new United Nations information centres, at the request of

the countries concerned, most recently in its resolution 56/64 of 24 December 2001. It is therefore proposed that the new model be applied to all the countries currently served by the information centres.

VIII. Adapting the model

53. The Department recognizes that there are significant differences among regions and that, as a result, no single model can be successfully applied to all regions of the world. The Department intends to tailor the regionalization concept to the diverse geographic and cultural characteristics of each region.

54. To ensure structural coherence of United Nations activities at the regional level, the Department will work in close cooperation with the regional commissions. As representative entities of the United Nations at the regional level, the commissions have established infrastructures in place, including intergovernmental links and relationships with regional organizations, which can be used to maximize the Organization's information outreach capabilities.

55. Preliminary proposals for the possible locations of regional centres are provided below. Since the proposals have not yet been the subject of formal consultations with the Member States concerned, they should be seen only as preliminary suggestions.

A. League of Arab States region

56. Information centres are located in nine of the States members of the League of Arab States, namely, in the cities of Algiers, Beirut, Cairo, Khartoum, Manama, Rabat, Sana'a, Tripoli and Tunis. Six of the centres are headed by resident coordinators. Three Beirut, Cairo and Sana'a have staff from the Department who serve as Directors.

57. In order to strengthen the United Nations information capacity in this critical region, it is proposed that a central hub be established in Cairo to cover North Africa and to coordinate the work of all the information centres and local information staff in the region. Cairo would be an ideal site for the central hub as it is home to the headquarters of the League and other regional organizations, and is a major centre for production of Arabic language materials. Owing to the significant information challenges in the region, it is proposed to retain the existing information centres in Beirut, at the headquarters of ESCWA in Manama and in Sana'a.

B. Asian States

58. There are a total of 11 information centres (not including the information service in Bangkok) in the Asian States, namely, in the following cities: Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kabul (inoperational), Kathmandu, Manila, New Delhi, Tehran, Tokyo and Yangon. Five of the information centres are headed by resident coordinators and one is headed by a staff member of ESCAP. The remaining five centres (Islamabad, Jakarta, New Delhi, Tehran and Tokyo) have Directors who are still members of the Department.

59. ESCAP has underscored that, with 62 members, it is the largest of the regional commissions in terms of membership and the total population it serves. The effective dissemination of information in the region therefore poses a particular challenge and consideration must be given to its special linguistic needs and to the variance in levels of development and access to information technologies. In addition, geopolitical realities also constrain the possibility of converting any of the existing information centres into regional hubs.

60. Owing to those factors, it is envisaged that the Department would maintain a number of individual information centres, including those in: Islamabad, to cover Pakistan; New Delhi, to cover India and the other countries of the subregion; Tehran, to cover the Islamic Republic of Iran; and Tokyo, to cover Japan. The information centre in Islamabad would work in close collaboration with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, where an international staff member at the D-1 level heads the information component. Further to this, it is proposed that the information service in Bangkok, in addition to its information responsibilities for ESCAP, be assigned regional responsibilities covering the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, including Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines, which currently host information centres.

61. As indicated in section III.B, a regional information centre will be established in Canberra (replacing the information centre in Sydney), to serve Australia and the Pacific States.

C. Latin American and Caribbean States

62. There are a total of 10 centres located in the Latin American and Caribbean States, namely, in the following cities: Asunción, Bogotá, Buenos Aires, La Paz, Lima, Managua (inoperational), Mexico City, Panama City, Port of Spain and Rio de Janeiro. In addition, ECLAC in Santiago has its own information unit, but no staff from the Department. Four of the information centres (Asunción, La Paz, Lima and Panama City) are headed by resident coordinators. The remaining five (Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Port of Spain and Rio de Janeiro) have Directors from the Department.

63. Bearing in mind the linguistic characteristics of the region, the Department proposes to establish three hubs in Latin America and the Caribbean. in Mexico City, the regional information centre would be headed by a Director at the D-1 level, and would cover Mexico and Spanish-speaking Central American and Caribbean countries, as well as provide strategic communications guidance to the entire Latin American and Caribbean region. Another hub would be created in Port of Spain, with responsibility for the English-speaking Caribbean countries. The third hub would be located in either Santiago or Buenos Aires, covering Spanish-speaking South American countries. National information staff would be posted in all the countries that previously hosted an information centre, and also in Jamaica.

64. A special arrangement would be established to address the Portuguese language needs of Brazil and link the lusophone countries on three continents.

D. African States

65. There are a total of 18 information centres in the African States (not including the information centres in the African States that are members of the League of Arab States, the information service in Addis Ababa and the United Nations Office in Asmara), namely, in the following cities: Accra, Antananarivo, Brazzaville, Bujumbura, Dakar, Dar es Salaam, Harare, Kinshasa, Lagos, Lomé, Lusaka, Maseru, Monrovia, Nairobi, Ouagadougou, Pretoria, Windhoek and Yaoundé. Twelve are headed by resident coordinators and one is headed by a UNEP staff member. Five of the information centres are headed by staff from the Department: Accra, Dakar, Harare, Lagos and Pretoria. An additional staff member from the Department is posted in Nairobi and another is stationed in Dar es Salaam.

66. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) of the African Union places a very strong emphasis on regional integration and regional approaches to development within Africa. NEPAD also emphasizes the need for African countries to strengthen the five subregional economic groupings, Southern Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa and North Africa.

67. To align its proposed network of regional information centres in Africa with the NEPAD approach, the Department proposes to establish a central hub in Addis Ababa, which would work in close cooperation with ECA to address the information needs of the continent as a whole, and six other regional hubs: in Pretoria for Southern Africa, in Yaoundé for Central Africa, in Nairobi for East Africa, in Dakar and Abuja for West Africa (covering French-speaking countries and English-speaking countries, respectively) and in Cairo for North Africa. The Department would also consider the establishment of an eighth regional hub in Luanda to cover the Portuguese-speaking African countries, on the basis of an offer made in November 2003 by the Government of Angola, pending examination of the resource implications of the proposal.

IX. Conclusion

68. As outlined in the present report, the Department considers that the implementation of its regionalization initiative will allow it to strengthen the flow and exchange of information on the United Nations in developing countries, within the resources allocated by the General Assembly to the United Nations information field presence, provided that the model is adapted to the realities of the developing world. It proposes to implement a flexible regionalization process that gives due attention to the characteristics of each individual region and country.

69. At the outset of the next phase, namely the extension of the regional hub initiative to developing countries, the Secretary-General looks forward to receiving the views of the Committee on Information, which will, in turn, be fully taken into account as the Department continues the implementation process, in consultation with Member States, with the aim of meeting the deadline fixed by the Secretary-General of completing the regionalization process over a three-year period that began in 2003.

Annex I

United Nations information centres and United Nations houses

1. The Department of Public Information continues to support the United Nations house concept and many United Nations information centres have been situated in such common premises, particularly in locations where there had been no provision of rent-free premises. As of January 2004, there were 58 United Nations houses in capitals worldwide. Of these, 25 were in locations that also host information centres. Where information centres exist in countries that host United Nations houses, they are co-located in all but seven instances. In a number of other locations, information centres share premises and some common services with other United Nations system partners.

2. The Department supports the United Nations house concept and has derived some benefits from it, notably the advancement of a common United Nations image and identity.

3. However, the Department has noted that the arrangements have, in most instances, led to increases in the operating costs of the relevant information centres, both in terms of rent and of common support charges, further reducing the limited resources available for local programme outreach activities.

4. In addition, since 1 August 2003, UNDP has instituted a formal cost recovery arrangement that charges the non-self-accounting information centres for the administrative and financial services performed on their behalf, according to a universal price list, which has significantly increased the operational costs of those information centres.

5. Locating information centres in United Nations houses presents an additional concern since such arrangements have often had a negative impact with regard to public accessibility since, among other factors, the premises are frequently located away from the city centres.

6. In recent months, heightened security awareness and the resulting decisions by the Office of the Security Coordinator have required some information centres to be moved from rent-free, or affordable premises, to United Nations houses, again at considerable cost.

7. The Department will continue to look into the ways and means of securing rent-free premises or subsidies from the host Governments, for both regional and other information centres, with a view to dedicating a greater portion of the limited resources at its disposal to outreach activities in the field.

8. Should the Department's regionalization proposal be approved, a number of information centres would be closed and individual staff assigned to the offices of the resident coordinators, which would be located within United Nations houses.

Annex II

Guidelines and criteria for the regionalization of United Nations information centres

- The human and financial resources allocated to a regional hub must be significantly more than the best-equipped United Nations information centre under current circumstances. It should have the capacity to produce and disseminate information materials and the professional capability to maintain productive contacts with media in the region, as well as academic institutions and non-governmental organizations.
- In a region with a common language, the hub shall be a centre for producing or adapting materials in that language, for use both in the region covered by the hub as well as in other parts of the world. Where there is more than one language, the hub should have the resources to undertake needed translations.
- A regional hub should have the necessary facilities to serve as a fully resourced reference centre for United Nations information.
- The host country would ideally have well developed transportation and aerial links with the rest of the region, a relatively well developed media landscape and modern communications systems, including connectivity, and active civil society institutions.
- The existence of other United Nations offices, including in particular a United Nations house, as well as regional organizations, may also be factors in deciding on the optimum location of a hub.
- The willingness of the host country Government to provide political and financial support, including the provision of rent-free premises, would be an important factor.
- To extend its reach, the regional information hub will collaborate closely with the country offices of United Nations resident coordinators, where they exist, and can engage in partnerships with national institutions and organizations including United Nations Associations.
- Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/300, the Department of Public Information will consult with concerned Member States on the rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres around regional hubs.

Annex III

Fulfilling the information mandate in developing countries: division of responsibilities between the regional information centres and national information staff

1. To enhance the flow of information on the United Nations to developing countries, the Department of Public Information proposes that its field information presence take three forms: (1) regional United Nations information centres, and (2) United Nations national information staff working out of the offices of the resident coordinators, or (3) the continuation of national information centres in some special circumstances.

1. Role of the regional information centres

2. A regional information centre would normally be based on a currently existing and well performing information centre located in a city that meets the requirements for hosting a hub. The main task of the regional information centre would be to ensure that the priorities of the United Nations are communicated to key audiences through the establishment of durable long-term strategic partnerships. Emphasis would be placed on using intermediaries rather than direct public outreach.

3. The programmatic activities of the regional information centres would focus on three areas:

(a) The dissemination of information on the work of the United Nations in particular on issues of priority concern, as identified by Headquarters;

(b) The promotion of issues of common concern to countries in the region, in particular development-related issues, as well as the work of the United Nations system in the region;

(c) The demonstration of how the United Nations country team makes a difference in people's daily lives, thereby clearly showing the value of the work of the United Nations system in the field.

4. The regional information centres would focus their resources on three main types of activities as set out below.

A. Media outreach

5. The most efficient and cost-effective way of reaching large sectors of society is to have local and regional media carry the United Nations message. Media outreach activities could include the following:

(a) Focusing on news organizations of the region;

(b) Adapting strategic communications plans, developed by Headquarters, to meet regional requirements;

(c) Compiling material and statistics of regional interest to support the placement of op-eds, press releases and the launching of reports;

(d) Disseminating information material to key media in the region by electronic means and maintaining a web site (while the degree of connectivity is not widespread in developing countries, most journalists have access to the Internet);

(e) Giving telephone interviews to media in the region;

(f) Organizing press conferences and briefings on the Organization's priority issues and on issues of particular interest to the region;

(g) In cooperation with Headquarters, providing national information staff with media guidance;

(h) Conducting media monitoring, and providing press reviews and clippings to Headquarters.

6. The new concept would also aim to enhance the capacity of the hubs to provide news and related materials on United Nations activities in their regions, ensuring distribution to global audiences through other Department channels, such as the United Nations News Centre web site, and the audio and video programming produced by United Nations TV and Radio.

7. The regional information centres would also provide feedback to the Department on the use of television and radio feature material produced at Headquarters.

B. Educational outreach

8. While it is difficult and time-consuming to reach educators and students, once the groundwork has been done educational programmes can be very effective and bring long-term benefits. Educational outreach activities could include the following:

(a) Selecting and adapting material for curricula development based on guidelines from Headquarters and input from UNESCO;

(b) Adapting teacher training packages to regional requirements;

(c) Developing components for model United Nations programmes and organizing regional model United Nations in cooperation with partners;

(d) Creating small-scale CyberSchoolBus packages;

(e) Conceptualizing and initiating regional letter-writing campaigns and essay competitions to be administered by the national information staff;

(f) Maintaining a comprehensive reference collection that serves educators and researchers from the region.

9. The centre's activities in this area would be supported by the Department's Educational Outreach Section at Headquarters, which is developing new partnerships in education with Governments, international agencies, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and other representatives of civil society.

C. Civil society/non-governmental organization outreach

10. Building on the increase in the number of non-governmental organizations in the 1990s and taking advantage of their interest in United Nations issues, the regional information centres would work closely with civil society organizations. They would concentrate on groups that are well established and interested in

establishing long-term relationships. Interaction with civil society could include the following:

(a) Providing information and material to non-governmental organizations for further dissemination to their members;

(b) Undertaking joint activities, such as conferences, seminars and workshops to promote issues of common interest;

(c) Advising non-governmental organizations on how to carry out promotional campaigns on key issues;

(d) Identifying speakers and resource people for events organized by non-governmental organizations.

11. The regional information centres would continue to support and contribute to the work of the United Nations country teams, to provide services and information to local authorities, as required, and to produce basic United Nations information material in major local languages.

12. As only limited additional staff and operational resources are expected to be available to the regional information centres in the short term, they would have to narrow their focus, concentrate their efforts on high-impact activities and work with a few, but highly influential, partners. The shift in focus is also necessitated by the fact that they would have to devote effort to supporting the national information staff in their regions. The regional information centres could, for example, develop an annual work plan consisting of elements that could be used fully, or in part, by the national information staff. They could train local partners, such as United Nations Associations, depository libraries and educational institutions, so that these partners could provide service functions. It is expected that the regional information centres will devote less time to ceremonies, concerts, exhibits, book fairs, film and video screenings, newsletters, public inquiries and to services of an administrative nature to Headquarters. They would concentrate on activities for which major partners can be identified.

2. Role of national information staff

13. One or more experienced and well trained national information staff would be placed in the offices of resident coordinators in locations where an information centre has been closed. They would work closely with the regional information centre to which they report. These national information staff would concentrate their efforts on media outreach, on cooperation with the United Nations country team of which they would be integral members and, to the extent possible, on education outreach. They would also be responsible for empowering the resident coordinator to be an even more effective spokesperson for the United Nations system. Should the country team jointly retain the former information centre's library and resource centre, the national information officers would contribute by ensuring that the collection served the local community. Information about national information staff, and the activities they undertake would be posted on the country team web site.